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"YOU'VE GOT AN AWESOME LOOK": ON NEGATION AND FETISHIZATION IN FERNANDO FRÍAS'S *YA NO ESTOY AQUÍ*

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Abstract: This article examines the film *Ya no estoy aquí*, written and directed by Fernando Frías de la Parra, vis-à-vis recent attempts to interrogate the emotional and political response to migrant suffering (Moraña, Žižek, Tobar). Specifically, this article looks at how while the protagonist's infatuation with *cumbias rebajadas* represents an attempt to reject the institutions, values, and economics in neoliberal society. Ultimately, it is argued, the film interrogates whether this refusal constitutes little more than a revolutionary fix, a regressive force that fails to provide liberation. More precisely, the film explicitly engages concerns similar to those of Héctor Tobar (2023), who worries that images of "helpless brown people" are little more than "static, one-dimensional images of immigration porn." The article thus corrects incomplete assessments of Frías's film and suggests a new direction in youth culture cinema for neoliberal times.

Palabras Clave: Film, Mexico, Fetishization, Neoliberalism, Migration, Fernando Frías

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ISSN: 1523-1720
NUMERO/NUMBER 52
Enero/January 2025

Frías Finds Success

Very few film directors are fortunate enough to enjoy both critical and commercial successes. Fewer still are lauded by their peers as zeitgeists—praised as a "torch that which is to come."[1] Yet, Mexican director Fernando Frías was celebrated as such just months after the May 2020 Netflix release of his *Ya no estoy aquí*. But five months later, in October of that same year, Netflix made public *'Ya no estoy aquí:' Una conversación entre Guillermo del Toro y Alfonso Cuarón*, a chat that included two-thirds of the so-called "Three Amigos" of contemporary Mexican Cinema. During their 14-minute discussion of *Ya no estoy aquí*, the two behemoth directors characterize Frías's film as a triumph of contemporary Mexican cinema during neoliberal times.[2] A month later, it was announced that Frias's work would represent Mexico at the 2021 Academy Awards, although ultimately, the film was not nominated to compete for the Oscar for Best Picture. More recently, Frías has released a second film titled *No voy a pedirle a nadie que me crea*, based on the 2016 novel by Juan Pablo Villalobos of the same name. This second film has garnered less press than Frías's first, the most notable review of the film being *Letras libres*' lukewarm evaluation.[3] Meanwhile, *Ya no estoy aquí* continues to be screened and discussed in public fora.[4] In November 2023, Frías's debut film was shown at the fifth Festival Internacional de Cine sobre Migración held in Tijuana. The press surrounding the Tijuana screening underscored the political import of Frías's film, describing how *Ya no estoy aquí* "muestra uno de los motivos de la migración: los problemas con cárteles que ponen en peligro la vida de las personas y sus familias."[5] Frías's first film, perhaps due to the catchy music or the centrality of the migration theme, has stuck with us, even as appraisals of the film continue to be mixed.

Of the favorable takes on Frías's film, critics underscore the director's attention to detail and his political awareness. Undoubtedly, the director is "a gifted visual storyteller" who "lets the story play out deliberately and soberly" (Ebiri). The film offers a "vivid and vibrant slice of life" (Lemire). A review in *The New York Times* praised the director for his "aesthetically delicate" film with his "thoughtful and precise" representation of the youth culture portrayed (Winkelman). *Ya no estoy aquí* was even described as "one of the best international films of 2020 on Netflix" (Castro 462). The film is intriguing in that it forwards dance as a "estrategía de resistencia" (Hernández Espinoza and Sedeño-Valdellos 11). Frías's work has justifiably received these many accolades.

Yet, more negative assessments of the film are also warranted; other scholarship on the film is far more critical. Ricardo Quintana Vallejo disparagingly describes Ulises Sampiero, the protagonist of *Ya no estoy aquí*, as "infantilized [and] apolitical" (368). One of Mexico's most renowned magazines, *Proceso*, laments that the film's ending "da la sensación de que algo faltó, quizá por su estructura que tiene más a lo anecdótico o a un final demasiado abierto."[6] The most trenchant reading of *Ya no estoy aquí* is an article co-authored by Irmgard Emmelhainz, Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, and Oswaldo Zavala, in which it is proposed that characters in Frías's film "nunca se reconocen como sujetos políticos o participantes conscientes dentro su propia realidad y menos con agencia sobre su entorno"—that is, the community of teenage rabble-rousers in Frías's film, along with the movie itself, are little more than a "producto cultural gestado a partir del consume" (Emmelhainz, Sánchez Prado, and Zavala). This critique is especially meaningful, especially given that—and as 2023's screening in Tijuana suggests—the film is still registered as politically potent. A significant number of viewers see the film as having something noteworthy to say about Mexico, about migration, about violence and youth.

This article proposes that both critics and enthusiasts of the film deserve attention. *Ya no estoy aquí* is remarkably unfulfilling in terms of developing an intelligible political stance. Yet, the film is also

1. Alfonso Cuarón describes Frías's film in these terms around 13:10 in *´Ya no estoy aquí´: A Talk with Guillermo del Toro and Alfonso Cuarón.*

2. The director Alejandro G. Iñárritu, the third of the "Three Amigos" of Mexican cinema did not participate in the conversation.

3. See Ernesto Diezmartínez's article.

4. See: https://citykankakee-il.gov/events-details.php?s=2024-09-24-until-justice-just-is-film-screening-of-yo-no-estoy-aqui

5. See Denise Ahumada's article.

6. See: https://www.proceso.com.mx/cine-permanencia-voluntaria/2020/6/12/ya-no-estoy-aqui-la-cumbia-de-la-resistencia-244426.html

ISSN: 1523-1720
NUMERO/NUMBER 52
Enero/January 2025

refreshingly cognizant of how migration dramas are all-too-often fodder for liberal guilt, cultural slumming, and the commodification of pain. Specifically, Frías's film attempts (somewhat successfully) to evade what has been referred to as the "fetishization of migration" bolstered by both popular culture and academia (Raghuram, Roos Breines, and Gunter). As globalized labor continues to make the news, and as politicians argue for mass deportations, scholarship across disciplines continue to debate how to best examine migration. *Ya no estoy aquí* deserves another appraisal because it tasks us to think through these issues.

Frías's film is flawed, even facile at times, and may be of greater commercial worth than of artistic merit; it exemplifies the vacuity of our present politics. Yet, this article also celebrates Frías's attempt to understand itself—its politics, its reputation, and its audience—vis-à-vis neoliberal times and marketplace trends. The metadiscursive acuity of *Ya no estoy aquí* cannot be ignored, and it should be read as an attempt to "de-migranticize" and "defetishize" the international and undocumented trek between Mexico and the United States. I thus extend critiques of *Ya no estoy aquí* even while proposing that it be understood as a necessary attempt to rethink the constant and unfortunate Othering of Latin American migrants in scholarship and on film.

Ulises's 'No'

Frías's protagonist—the migrant Ulises—seems so attractive, even worthy of fetishization because (not unlike other adolescent actors) he reads as a rebel. He's an iconoclast, a rabble-rouser; passionate, he comes from the tough streets of Monterrey. In many ways, he could be the very next Gael García Bernal or Diego Luna—the young Mexican actors who, during the early 2000s, became the talk of international cinema, the "*buena onda* poster boys" of Mexican film (Aldama 19). Particularly interesting for our considerations, however, is that his rebel sneer is constantly coupled with the concept of negation. Frías's film gestures toward the idea that Ulises is a bit of a tabula rasa, a floating signifier devoid of a clear ideological bent; in short, the protagonist is ideal fodder to be fetishized by viewers. Will we take the bait?

First, we would be remiss if we totally discounted the cogency and popularity of negation—an idea that has enjoyed a privileged place in Latin American artistic production over time. One only need remember how Rubén Dario, in his celebrated 1904 poem titled "A Roosevelt," disarmed readers and rebuked the United States' exceptionalism with a simple "No."[7] Much later, in 1987, when relations between the United States and Latin America were again uniquely tense and the international community took stock of the numerous examples of late twentieth-century U.S. interventionism around the world, Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar debuted his *A Logo for America* in New York City's iconic Times Square. The LCD display featured the words "This Is Not America" superimposed over the map of the United States, thus interrogating who is allowed to identify as "American." More recently, scholar Esther Garbara has proposed negation as central to Latin American responses to the U.S.-driven neoliberalism. Garbara studies artistic interventions that often serve to "negate the negation of political and social alternatives to American neoliberalism" (Garbara 8). Essentially, the concept of negation provides a compelling riposte to machinations of economic power in that it rejects subsumption by capital. Finally, negation has formed a crucial part of Marxist thought; indeed, for Marx's collaborator Frederick Engels, dialectical thinking was best defined as "the negation of the negation."[8] Later on, in the twentieth century, Frankfurt School member Herbert Marcuse continued with the tradition of negation by advocating for the "Great Refusal" as the starting point for political activism in the contemporary era: a complete

7. Dario engages the United States apostrophically: "Crees que la vida es incendio, / que el progreso es erupción; / en donde pones la bala / el porvenir pones. / No."

8. See Engels' 1877 essay "Anti-Dühring:" https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/anti-duhring/ch11.htm

ISSN: 1523-1720
NUMERO/NUMBER 52
Enero/January 2025

repudiation of rationality, of bourgeois subjectivity, and of capitalism, with an eye toward an inherently unknown future. *Ya no estoy aquí*, I shall argue, constitutes a similar rhetorical, artistic, and political gesture. Ulises is, in this sense, a consummate example of disaffected and iconoclastic youth whose tendency to negate realities rather than propose new ones invites viewer fetishization. He is the perfect poster child for youthful angst in a film marketed to international audiences curious as to migration, Latino musical genres, and urban subcultures. Before detailing the diverse ways in which the trope of negation runs through the film, a brief summary of the plot is warranted.

The film takes place in 2011 against the backdrop of the squalid, low-rise neighborhoods of Monterrey, Mexico, one of the nation's largest cities—a locale associated with industrialization, new money, and with a penchant to look outward. As a major city closer to large U.S. cities (Houston, San Antonio) than to Mexico City (Monterrey is only three hours from the U.S. border), Nuevo León's capital enjoys a uniquely transnational vibe. In cultural and especially musical terms, the city is known for its remarkable hybridization.[9] During the early 2000s, Monterrey became a hub for "Kolombia" or "Cholombiano" fashion and music—an urban subculture that developed in the city's poorer areas and that flourished, in part, due to the significant number of Colombians migrants who had fled the violence in their home country. Monterrey youth picked up on these demographic trends and, deeming themselves "Colombias," donned oversized clothing, showed a preference for *cumbias*, and were (sometimes, correctly) associated with gangbanging.[10] The protagonists of *Ya no estoy aquí* are almost wholly immersed in these trends and identities.

The film's plot closely follows a street gang called Los Terkos—"the stubborn ones." The ragtag group of street urchins—roughly between the ages of ten and twenty—are led by a 17-year-old named Ulises, the film's protagonist. Dressed in bright, baggy clothes, and sporting eccentric hairdos, Los Terkos spend their days partying, dancing, and showing off their stylish colors. Somewhat reminiscent of 1995's *KIDS* by director Larry Clark, none of the actors had been professionally trained before the shooting of the movie.

One day, while trying to scrape money together to buy an MP3 player full of their beloved *cumbias rebajadas*, Los Terkos—who constitute a smaller part of a larger gang in Monterrey, Las Estrellas—have a run-in with a rival cartel. Ulises witnesses the cartel shoot his colleagues, who mistake Ulises for being a co-conspirator in the recent drive-by. Facing newfound danger, Ulises is sent to New York by his mother. Viewers begin to understand the importance of our protagonist's epic name (Ulysses), which suggests both a spiritual journey and a nagging desire to return home. His last name, "Sampiero," in its own way, may suggest "sans pier." After being smuggled in a hidden compartment in a passenger van carrying Mexican tourists to American malls on the other side of the border, he arrives in the borough of Queens, where he will eke out a less than favorable existence. Although he occasionally works as a day laborer, he often finds trouble given his lack of English skills, his desultory attitude, and his musical preferences—his mad, stubborn love of *cumbias rebajadas*. After falling out with one of his roommates, Ulises takes a job cleaning the rooftop of a store owned by Mr. Loh, an older Chinese immigrant. Loh's granddaughter, Lin, is immensely curious about Ulises and befriends him, wanting to learn more about his life in Mexico, the gang, his hair, his dance styles—his everything. Of course, she allows Ulises to temporarily live in a run-down shed on the roof of her grandfather's corner store.

Ultimately, Ulises fails to gain an economic footing in New York City. Struggling to hold onto his identity, unable to forge another or change, Ulises returns to Monterrey, where he finds that some friends have died and others have given up the gang life. So much has changed, yet he

9. See Jose Juan Olvera Gudiño's chapter, 90. Also see Alexandra Lippman.

10. See Amanda Watkins' text.

ISSN: 1523-1720
NUMERO/NUMBER 52
Enero/January 2025

cannot. The film's final shot sees Ulises dancing atop a half-completed building on the impoverished outskirts of Monterrey. He remains a world away from the city's posh downtown. There, among the veritable flotsam and jetsam of Monterrey's emphatic urbanism, Ulises listens to an mp3 player and looks across the sprawling metropolis. His figure, located in the bottom right side of the screen, is dwarfed alongside the cityscape. Effectively, he is completely overshadowed by monstrous Monterrey. It's as if (and as the film's title suggests) he was not even there. Somewhere off in the distance, an orderly line of police cars, sirens blasting and lights spinning, races down a street. Suddenly, in middle of the cumbia Ulises is listening to—a song that we, as viewers, listen to extra-diegetically—the device's batteries die. The music cuts out and both Ulises and viewers are confronted with silence—that is, the negation of sound. Only the remote howl of the police car sirens moan in the distance. For Ulises, nothing has really changed.

At the level of form and content—in terms of both visual palette and plotlines—Frías's film is replete with examples of negation. Obvious yet worth mentioning is the title of the film—*Ya no estoy aquí*. The title itself is paradoxical, ironic, a type of negation of a negation. In no way does the title affirm who Ulises is—who the protagonist is or what he's about. Rather, the title suggests a constant slippage of meaning: the inability to pin down the speaker. After all, one usually refers to other places, other destinations when negating their presence: "Ya no estoy allá" or "I'm not there" is a far more logical enunciation than "I'm not here." After all, isn't one *always here*? In this way, Ulises is profoundly "terco" or rather, "stubborn," in that his identity rests nowhere—save for, perhaps, with his beloved *cumbias rebajadas*. Nor does the title define a political message. As viewers, we are free to fetishize Ulises as we wish, without consequences or conflict.

During the films' first minutes, images, angles, and camera work gesture toward negativity: vacant locales and empty places that emphasize characters' isolation —usually that of Ulises. At approximately 10 minutes into the film, after having witnessed Ulises's departure from the slums of Monterrey, as he hopes for a safe arrival to the United States, narration flashes back to his old neighborhood, when he still felt secure as a cumbia-loving, showboating street thug. Ulises is shown walking Monterrey's labyrinthine back alleys, the camera moving in front of him, looking back toward a serene, strong, and confident leader. Then, for the first time in a film that begins in medias res, the camera looks toward the sky and the title stretches across the screen. The shot is a study in negative space; tellingly, the "estoy" of the title is backgrounded by blue sky, air, nothingness. It is as if "estoy"— "to be," conjugated in the first person singular and thus, marking the individual—is wrapped up in absences, vacuity, and negation.

Even before this title sequence, Frías establishes the film's visual template as defined by negative spaces. Monterrey's skyscrapers are constantly positioned from afar, the camera filming from atop the hilly areas surrounding the city's main commercial hub: the vastness of Monterrey's low-rise sprawl, removed from wealth and development, is emphasized. Visually, the film constantly points up the divergent modernity of the urban landscape. Populations on the lower rungs of society—people like Ulises, his gang, and his fatherless family—are forever on the periphery, both literally and figuratively. Individuals are filmed as isolated, miniscule identities—they seem to be docile bodies trapped within a totalizing whole. Characters in Frías's film are often depicted via long shots, visually "dominated" or rendered small within a whole. With the concluding take in the opening scene, roughly 5 minutes into the film, Ulises, ostensibly fleeing for his life, is shuttled away in a humble sedan. The car drives toward the vanishing point, over the hills of Monterrey, almost driving toward nothingness itself.

The vehicle is small compared to the rest of the shot, a lone proof of life in a gray landscape otherwise replete with asphalt and cement.

Negation in Frías's film is more than just visual—more than mere form: negation is also made manifest in terms of content. Within the film, characters do not make positive, agentive choices per se but rather, make decisions that refuse to offer an affirmative stance: they are, in certain sense, mere communicating vessels. Characters are not defined by the actions they take but what they are forced to do. Just as a photographic negative constitutes the reverse of an image, characters in *Ya no estoy aquí* are depicted as reactions to a forever undiminished, totalized society. One cannot even think 'off the grid' and all experiences are secondhand, even parasitic. Thus, Kolombias are not Colombians but rather, Mexicans that fetishize Colombian culture; the *cumbias* they listen to are not necessarily an autochthonous musical genre rather, they are rendered *rebajadas*. Los Terkos even steal and repurpose a local politician's vinyl banner one night in order to scrawl the placard's reverse side with their logo-ized moniker. The first cumbia we hear in the film is sung by a child of no more than 10-years old, the youngest and most recent member of Los Terkos, a boy referred to as El Sudaderas (19:06-19:15). What type of child has lived enough life to identify with the melancholy, world-weary lyrics of a cumbia? Yet, the lyrics suggest a maturity, a nostalgia, and a loneliness: "Cómo extraño a mi sabana hermosa / Metido en la cordillera / Esperando que llegue la hora / De regresar a mi tierra." El Sudaderas experiences and emotions seem less than genuine, if not outright imitations—a fetishized, parasitical relation to sentimentality.

Two scenes from the first minutes of the film are pertinent to thinking through the film's attention to negation. At approximately 13 minutes into the film, we meet the gang of Los Terkos for the first time, wandering around their shantytown neighborhood during the nighttime hours. A middle-aged, rather disheveled man intercepts the group of eight, closing off their route home. He warns the streetwise adolescents that police are in the area and that they will need to change their trajectory. The police force—this appendage of state power—delimits the possibilities for mobility around the neighborhood, alienating members of the gang and tasking them to reassess their actions. All told, their response is not affirmative but rather, negative—not *action* but rather, *reaction*. They are not agentive but instead subjected to the whims of power. The scene plays out in the following way:

> León: ¿Qué onda, güey? Por aquí no se puede pasar güey.
>
> Ulises: León, carnal, no traemos nada.
>
> León: Pues no estoy pidiendo cuota, güey. ¿Por qué estoy pidiendo cuota? Sabes que soy Terko de honor.
>
> Ulises: ¿Por qué no se puede güey?
>
> León: Al chile, ahorita que venía por la vuelta, güey. Había dos camionetas blindadas.
>
> No conviene por esa calle. Busqué por el otro callejón. Y por ahí les gané, güey.
>
> Terkos member: Ey. Me acaba de mandar un mensaje mi primo, güey, que está cerrada la calle.
>
> Ulises: ¿Contras o qué verga?
>
> Terkos member: Policías ministeriales. De seguro han de andar cazando a alguien, al chile.

ISSN: 1523-1720
NUMERO/NUMBER 52
Enero/January 2025

> Ulises: Vamos a dar la vuelta güey. (14:15-14:32)

Thus, Los Terkos's identity is defined by the social fetters placed on them. Authority crafts who they are as individuals. They are obliged to circle back around in order to get home, perhaps a bit like Homer's Ulysses. They don't choose a route—the road chooses them.

The scene immediately following (roughly around 15:16) sees the group of eight, still on their way back home, bump into a group of three elder gang leaders in Los Terkos's orbit—older adolescents that are part of the Estrellas, the gang organization comprised of delinquents around Monterrey. The Estrellas leader, the scowling, formidable-looking Isaí, calls Ulises aside before the gang continues on toward their homebase. He congratulates Ulises for taking the young boy under his wing and, interestingly, describes his personality as having been forged not by what he has experienced in life but rather, by what he *hasn't* experienced: namely, a father figure. Essentially, his identity is the fruit of negation—a product of what he has been denied:

> Isaí: Está bien, güey. Están bien morros. Sobre todo aquel, mira, El Sudaderas. Se mira bien morro, güey. Me hubiera gustado tener un compa como tú, que anduviera cuidando la banda. Pero, pues, chale, no se hizo. (16:21-16:49)

Isaí, like Ulises, is defined by those negations, denials, and interdictions that he experienced; subjectivity is forged where power is not.

Yet other negations in *Ya no estoy aquí* are notable and remarkably subtle. In one scene, we see Ulises in a New York City public library, seated at a computer, scrolling through social media associated with his beloved Terkos. While surfing on a webpage that looks similar to Myspace, he comes across a post from the now-deceased Isaí from September 7, 2011. The camera focuses on the computer screen: "Isassaiii: Ese perro, ya no habla o ke, te olvidas!" (1:15:31). Ulises has become a type of ghost, haunting his own past life; Isaí, in turn, has become a real ghost, shot down in the street by a rival gang.

In another scene, after Ulises has been taken in by U.S. authorities, he finds himself in a detention center for undocumented migrants. A guard enters a stark, otherwise empty holding room filled with migrants of all types—men, women, and children—all waiting to be attended to by border services. The officer begins to call out names one by one, asking detainees to stand. Their last names are called out first: "Lucás Remedio, Tomás," "García García, Esteban," etc. When Ulises's name is called, it becomes clear that the name he has provided the authorities is actually a lack of a name: "Sin ferias a secas, Ulises" (1:37:22). Dejected after being caught by the authorities, he has provided the powers that be a phony name: "Ulises," whose last name is, "Without a dime, that's it!" His smug joke focuses on absence: he proposes a lack of identity—he is Ulises "penniless" and nothing more.

Frías repeats the trope time after time. When Lin and Ulises have a falling out, Ulises returns to the apartment of Lin's father, hoping to avoid spending another night on the streets. Lin's father calls from the other room: "Who is it?" "No one," Lin answers back (1:30:08). In a real sense, Ulises has become a no one. Nothingness closes in on Ulises by the end of the film, when the protagonist, tired of trying to make it in New York City, gives himself over to the false nirvana of drugs. When he arrives back home to Monterrey, he finds the Terko's world of *cumbias*, gangbanging, and joie de vivre has ended. There, he attends the funeral of one of his Terko friends. After the funeral, Ulises visits his former best bud, Jeremy, who has recently converted to Christianity, gone clean, left behind gangbanging, and now dedicates himself to proselytizing via Christian rap. Jeremy offers to bring Ulises into the fold, which garners a terse response from Ulises, also appropriately

wrapped up in negating language:

> Jeremy: Cuando quieras, ésta es tu casa y eres bienvenido.
>
> Ulises: No, no se hace güey. Ya estoy chido. (1:40:28-1:40:35)

A few reasons for Frías's use of negation are possible. Perhaps Frías's film (astutely?) recognizes the "power of the negative"—the permanent revolution, the will to negate in order to constantly look beyond the status quo. Perhaps (disappointingly?) the film forwards negation in order to avoid the very real possibility that any sort of political messaging may be subsumed, fetishized, or used as a rebellion fix. Perhaps (even worse!) the film promotes negation because, at heart, it has nothing to say. Of these possible explanations as to the trope of negation in the film, in the next section I argue that the second is the most convincing: *Ya no estoy aquí* is aware that as a cinematic product, Ulises and his border-crossing, musically savvy journey may be all-too-readily fetishized by international viewers. Frías's film asks the audience to question the authenticity of our multicultural predilections.

Fetishization in *Ya no estoy aquí*

Neither migration, nor fetishization—nor the fetishization of migrants and their plight—are new phenomena. However, only during our times have the two concepts been so intimately linked. It would be remiss not to mention Karl Marx's famous discussion of fetishism in the opening chapter of *Capital*, where he describes it as a "flight into the misty realm of religion." (166). While the German philosopher analyzes how commodities obfuscate the social relations that produce goods, Franz Fanon, with his *Black Skin, White Masks*, theorizes how racialized bodies can also be fetishized. More recently, Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe has proposed that "if we really take that image of the traveler seriously, it would open us to new horizons on the question of identity and fetishism of identity."[11] Similarly, Slavoj Žižek interrogates civil society's immediate and philosophically vacuous "readiness to feel guilty." The Slovenian philosopher proposes that feelings of guilt, as "response to the migrant crisis…puts refugees in the totally passive position of victims."[12] Among activists and bureaucrats, too, it has become apparent that "[m]edia and political responses to Europe's recent 'refugee crisis' often portray refugees as either criminal invaders or vulnerable victims—in both cases, as inherently 'other.'"[13] Finally, Migrant Studies scholars in particular have begun to question "how migrants as a category are constructed and fetishized" (Raghuram, P., Breines, M.R. & Gunter, A.). They warn about our tendency to "categorize, essentialize and even fetishize migrants" (King 23). Within this particular academic milieu, it has been forwarded that "de-migranticization is becoming a core strategy for overcoming the fetishization of migrants in migration studies" (Dahinden, J. Raghuram, P., Breines, M.R. & Gunter, 20). [14]

Yet others have taken up the representation of migrants in media and the arts, proposing that we look beyond schlocky "trauma porn" that characterizes much work.[15] For example, Adrian Pérez-Melgosa argues that although many films on migrations intend to denounce abuses suffered by migrants, they often "unintentionally contribute to a form of cultural violence that diminishes their agency" ("Low-Intensity Necropolitics," 219). Similarly, Mabel Moraña, bemoans that migrants are often seen as bodies "out of place" (Línea de fuga, 237). For Moraña, migrants are commonly viewed as "anonymous and objectified, clustered and promiscuous, a kind of residue or excretion that should remain invisible" (337). Catherine Russell, in turn, warns against migrant narratives that fail to move beyond journalistic clichés ("Migrant Cinema," 128). Literary scholars, too, such as Ignacio Sánchez-Prado rightfully excoriated Jeanine Cummins' 2020 novel *American Dirt*, a work that dramatizes a migrant's journey north on the infamous *La Bestia*.[16]

11. See: https://www.lafriquedesidees.org/achille-mbembe-a-cure-to-the-fetishism-of-identity/

12. See the author's "Migrants, racists and the left."

13. See the article by Dina Pasic and Giovanni Fontana.

14. Also see article by J. Dahinden.

15. See: https://www.ocweekly.com/the-medias-trauma-porn-coverage-of-immigrants-must-be-rejected/

16. See Ignacio Sánchez Prado 2021.

ISSN: 1523-1720
NUMERO/NUMBER 52
Enero/January 2025

All told, our is a time characterized by nothing short of the "fetishization of migrant fashion, food, music, urban neighborhoods … a multicultural migrant sublime" (Stokes). At the very least, Frías's *Ya no estoy aquí* constitutes, I argue, a gesture toward de-migraticiticize. Even while recounting the dire straits of counterculture youth, the film manifests its awareness that not all reactions to distress are anodyne, nor ideologically free.

Intriguingly, the protagonist of *Ya no estoy aquí*, Ulises, at first blush appears as the epitome of disaffected migrant youth. Quite reasonably, the film has been analyzed as such: a coming-of-age story about middle-class indifference and xenophobia (Deborah Shaw). Ulises's story invites both serious reflection on the issue of migration at the US-Mexico border even as the teen—with his glossy hair, unwavering scowl, and unquenchable infatuation with Kolombia subculture is, in short, the perfect fodder for fetishization. Multiple scholars, such as Laura Podalsky, María Soledad Paz-Mackay, Omar Rodríguez, Carolina Rocha, Georgia Seminet, Geoffrey Maguire, and Rachel Randall, have explored the box office and critical success of adolescents in Latin American cinema. As Podalasky affirms, [o]ver the past decade or so, there has been a proliferation of films from a variety of Latin American countries about disaffected youth among them" (109). These productions, like *Ya no estoy aquí*, are, in no way apolitical in character. Thus, Podalsky suggestively proposes that "discussions of "today's youth" are often inflected, in one way or another, with debates about the region's recent political history" (110). Rocha, too, sees the rise of youth in film as a response to large-scale socioeconomic conditions. As she notes, adolescents "have also been screened in Latin American films to characterize the transitional period from the 1990s to the new century when globalization has intensified" (Rocha 10). Sánchez-Prado, too, reminds us, "the emergence of youth as a cinematic topic is as much a matter of emergent audiences as a vehicle for expressing the ideologies of citizenship and formation in a transitional society" ("Migrant Cinema," 128). With the social, political, and cultural import of adolescents in Latin American cinema in mind, it is appropriate to interpret Frías's film as inspired by various contemporary phenomena: the significant and newsworthy migration between the United States and Mexico, along with the globalization of culture and especially music. Finally, the film is a response to the neoliberalization of Mexico's film industry, which saw Mexican forms of national cinema "eroded" as (Sánchez-Prado). *Ya no estoy aquí* attempts to respond to our contemporary milieu, a time when the so-called Three Amigos—directors Del Toro, Iñárritu and Cuarón—have made all things Mexico so very attractive, even lucrative, vis-à-vis the global market.[17]

While Ulises's infatuation with *cumbias rebajadas* represents his attempt to reject the institutions, values, and experiences in bourgeois society ultimately, the film interrogates whether this refusal constitutes little more than a revolutionary fix, a regressive force that fails to provide liberation. The film also wonders whether we can do more than fetishize him, his status as a migrant, his cool attitude as a dance-crazed disaffected youth. First, it is worth recounting how Frías's protagonist rebels against without much of a cause—save for baggy pants and an MP3 player full of *cumbias*.

Given that *Ya no estoy aquí* centers on music, migration, and international relationships between individuals, it would be erroneous, perhaps impossible, to ignore the film's message regarding the political possibilities of popular culture. To what extent can products of mass culture make us aware of serious social problems? Do the music, movies, and art we consume serve to stupefy us or inspire us? What are our motivations when we make choices as consumers of art? Can performative activism really effect change? On one hand, Frías's film gives itself over to this interpretation: as Frías notes in various interviews, his protagonist, Ulises, via migration and dance, does hope

17. See the article by Francisco Aviles Pino. Also see: https://mexico.arizona.edu/revista/film-discovering-mexican-cinemas-new-golden-age

ISSN: 1523-1720
NUMERO/NUMBER 52
Enero/January 2025

to leave behind the violence of Northern Mexico: dance is a contestatory gesture.[18] Furthermore, Frías is certainly not alone in promulgating the idea that cumbia culture may provide a forum for marginalized voices.[19] On the other hand, an immensely cogent element of the film—and one that has been ignored by critics or scholars—is that *Ya no estoy aquí* successfully and thoroughly interrogates whether Ulises's seemingly limitless stubbornness was truly radical. As I propose, Frías rather ingeniously queries whether his characters—although believing themselves to be rebels, iconoclasts, and astute culture vultures—evince little more than a recapitulation of consumerist values. Their likes may, in fact, be mere revolutionary fixes, regressive force that promises but fails to provide liberation. Often, they are but crass examples of cultural slumming that "affirm" the *status quo*.

One of the more insightful elements *Ya no estoy aquí* explicitly points up this very line of investigation: the extent to which other cultures are fetishized, the vulgarity of cultural slumming, and the lack of art's political possibilities—be it photography, music, or dance. In this way, Frías's film may be more intriguing than critics have suggested. While Ulises's infatuation with *cumbias rebajadas* represents his attempt to reject bourgeois life, other plotlines in the film suggest that Kolombia culture has been vulgarized, co-opted—they are less than innocent. That is, the supposed "purity" or "authenticity" of Ulises's relationship with Kolombia culture is undermined by the fact that other characters in the film approach him in a similar way. Strangely, in a film about the confluence of marginalized voices and artistic predilections, viewers are tasked to interrogate the legitimacy of our own political allegiances and artistic interests.

Less than four minutes into the film, we meet Lin, seated at the counter of her father's convenience store in the borough of Queens, New York City. She leaves through a large book of photography when Ulises, prepared to work with another young Latino on a small clean up job for Mr. Loh, enters Mr. Loh's bodega. Upon closer inspection, Lin is flipping through New York-based photographer Richard Sandler's *The Eyes of the City*, a book first published in 2016 but which includes spontaneous, street scene-type photography of grimy New York City's urban life from 1977 to 2001. Intriguingly, the book highlights a political vision of the U.S.'s largest city, a work that "exudes a relentless need to show the polarity of class and race that on a daily basis is thrust upon urban-dwellers" (Levy). Lin, it would seem, is very much interested in how the proverbial "other half" lives. She, too, is given to aesthetic visions of urban society's economic and cultural disjoints.

Yet other scenes point up our tendency to project onto, even fetishize different cultural practices. In the second scene of *Ya no estoy aquí*, still less than ten minutes into the film, Ulises, along with a group of other Latino workers are busy renovating a New York City brownstone. A somewhat cubby, white American, clad in shorts and a t-shirt, follows the group into the building, carrying a formidable camera. Seemingly enamored with Ulises's look, he requests a photograph. The following conversation ensues:

> Photographer: Excuse me, my friend, my friend. Is there any way I can take your photograph just like that? Perfect, hey you've got an awesome look. [Snaps a few shots] So, what I do is run a website where I go around and photo random people and learn just a little bit about them.
>
> Ulises's Coworker: He doesn't speak English.
>
> Photographer: Could you translate?
>
> Ulises's Coworker: No, man, sorry we are about to start working again. (6:42-6:54)

18. For example, see Frías's interview with El Cine en la SER here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mY_B1qHnqro. Also see María Fernanda Mugica's article.

19. See the article from Pablo Vila, et al.

ISSN: 1523-1720
NUMERO/NUMBER 52
Enero/January 2025

Frías thus signals a contradictory relationship between art and labor. The photographer seems politically aware, interested in illustrating that even the working classes have a sense of fashion. Yet, the photographer's request also feels condescending; he is cosplaying activism while trawling for Likes on social media.

Lin's affection for Ulises is similarly interrogated when Ulises is found squatting in the storage attic above the store belonging to Lin's father. In order to communicate with Ulises, Lin enlists an unnamed, bilingual friend whose parents, he explains, are from Mexico. Lin's attraction to Ulises is palpable here although we should necessarily wonder where her concern for the destitute Ulises begins:

> Lin: First tell me why you broke into our property.
>
> Lin's friend: Quiere saber por qué te metiste a dormir aquí.
>
> Ulises: Los pinches puñetas con los que vivía me echaron montón y ya.
>
> Lin: What did he say?
>
> Lin's friend: Wait. ¿Por qué te pegaron?
>
> Ulises: Porque eran un chingo y yo solo nomás.
>
> Lin's friend: No, digo, ¿por qué motivo se pelearon?
>
> Ulises: Me estaban echando carrilla por mi pelo.
>
> Lin's friend: He says the people who beat him bullied him because of his hair.
>
> Lin: Tell him we think his style is cool. Ask him who did his hair.
>
> Lin's Friend: How is that relevant, Lin? (59:25-60:01)

Interestingly, Ulises, our protagonist, also seems to reify other characters, seeing them how he wants to, more curious as to what they represent than enjoying them for the complexity of who they actually are. When he first meets a sex worker, Gladys, in a Spanish-speaking bar in New York City, Ulises explains to her that he does not dance to the type of music that the bar is playing. Rather, he likes Kolombias. Gladys responds: "Colombia no es un tipo de música. Es un país. Es mi país" (22:31). Essentially, Ulises incorrectly believes that Gladys, as a Colombian, must share his affection for *cumbias rebajadas.* He erroneously believes that she epitomizes all the nostalgia, all the utopia, and all the angst that some faraway place called "Colombia" entails. Intriguingly, just seconds before, the camera had briefly paused over a couple in the corner of the bar, snuggled up together, a white male wearing a yarmulke together with a dark-skinned female. Is Frías simply documenting the multiracial and multicultural character of that most global of urban centers—New York City? Or, rather, does he interrogate how libidinal relations enter into the sphere of politics, labor, and art? I believe that Frías's film undermines his characters' supposed political awareness; rather, it is proposed that characters' artistic predilections constitute little more than cultural slumming, fetishization, and revolutionary fixes.

As Ignacio Sáncez Prado has explained, Mexican cinema has, during neoliberal times, experienced a profound retooling, making it palpable for an international audience.[20] Both the silliness and the cleverness of *Ya no estoy aquí* is that it looks to pop music for future politics—for both better and worse, the perfect fodder for our contemporary times. Until we dream up better political answers to the traumas associated with a

20. As Ignacio Sánchez Prado explains (2014), "new Mexican cinematic culture converges with the national and the global, politics and affect, reflecting relationships it had spent the previous decade retooling" (182).

globalized labor market, we may not be much better than Frías's New York City yuppie photographer, praising others for their "awesome look."

ISSN: 1523-1720
NUMERO/NUMBER 52
Enero/January 2025

ISSN: 1523-1720
NUMERO/NUMBER 52
Enero/January 2025

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